

VEILING: THE QUR'ĀN AND HADITH VERSUS FEMINIST NOTIONS

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The Niqāb and burqa are outer garments, and methods of veiling used by Muslim women around the globe. This seemingly simple affair is met by tremendous controversy when put into practice. Why? In this paper, we will first dissect the prominent anti-feminist critique of the veil as a salient source of its politically charged nature. Second, we will provide a succinct overview of the historical purpose and practice of veiling in Islam as it is positioned throughout the Qur'ān and other pieces of Islamic literature in an effort to negate the anti-feminist narrative of veiling. Lastly, we will identify the consequences that anti-feminist critiques of the veil present for Muslim women. Overall, this paper argues that an analysis of the Qur'ān and Islamic texts on the significance of veiling practices can work to eliminate the Western notion that the veil is inherently anti-feminist. This said analysis is essential as the perpetuation of this false narrative results in negative consequences for the Muslim world.

The niqāb and the burqa are methods of veiling used by many Muslim women around the globe. However, this seemingly simple affair is met by tremendous controversy when put into practice. Clothing, while serving as a practical method to insulate the body from climatic extremes, also serves a social function by informally conveying information about the wearer to their daily audience. The accuracy of the 'information' being relayed by our garments, of course, is ambiguous and often a result of the stereotypes which pervade our society.¹ The notion that the veil is representative of an inherently repressed female population is one of many common responses to this politically charged garment in the West, and as such, is the focus of this work. In this paper, we will first dissect the prominent anti-feminist critique of the veil as a salient source of its politically charged nature. Second, we will provide a succinct overview of the historical purpose and practice of veiling in

¹Küster, Krumhuber, and Hess, "You are what You Wear," 2.

Islam as it is positioned throughout the Qur'ān and other pieces of Islamic literature in an effort to negate the anti-feminist narrative of veiling. Lastly, we will identify the consequences that anti-feminist critiques of the veil present for Muslim women. Overall, this paper argues that an analysis of the Qur'ān and Islamic texts on the significance of veiling practices can work to eliminate the Western notion that the veil is inherently anti-feminist. This said analysis is essential as the perpetuation of this false narrative results in negative consequences for the Muslim world overall.

THE CRITIQUE AND ITS SOURCES

There is a prominent Western strain of critique regarding the practice of veiling which presents it as anti-feminist, and as the antithesis of modern expression. In this strain of thought, a veil is a tool used within a patriarchal society to oppress and segregate Muslim women.² Within the non-Muslim world, this forced, anti-feminist veiling is often attributed to familial, societal or religious pressures, which signifies the lack of agency Muslim women are granted.³ Additionally, the veil is understood as the epitome of the sheer backwardness of Islamic society in comparison to the superior West. This 'clash of civilizations' ideology has been upheld by Western political and media outlets over time.⁴ Further, Saher argues that Hollywood films such as *Arabian Nights* also popularized the narrative that Muslim women are locked up, awaiting liberation from brown men by their Western allies.⁵ This is significant due to the impact Hollywood movies have on popular opinion. An anchor to the anti-feminist veil argument was formed when the Taliban in Afghanistan imposed on the female population a singular form of veiling which was traditionally linked to the elite, rather than allowing Afghani women to choose their method of veiling; this event was skewed by Western media to further perpetuate the narrative of patriarchally enforced veiling.⁶ Analysis of Islamic texts, however, allow us to demystify these notions and dismiss the perceived necessity of 'saving' Muslim women.

VEILING IN ISLAMIC TEXTS

There are two main sources we can look to in order to dissect the practice of veiling as it was originally intended within the Islamic religion: the Qur'ān and Hadith. Analysis of these sources is imperative insofar as they allow us to rebut the anti-feminist critiques of Islamic veiling highlighted earlier in this paper. It is important to note that there are many approaches to interpreting these texts, ranging from modernist to fundamentalist, rendering the actual practice of veiling highly varied amongst Muslims.

²Amer, *What Is Veiling?* 125.

³Amer, 21.

⁴Cloud, "To Veil the Threat of Terror," 286-287.

⁵Amer, 78.

⁶El Shakry, *Gender and Sexuality in Islam*, 297.

In the Qur'ān, the hijab (veil) is mentioned seven times.⁷ For the most part, these refer to a separation between people, a division or a distinction between groups. These guidelines are presented not to seclude women or deny their liberty but rather to grant them protection and to allow them to live pious Muslim lives while participating in the public sphere.⁸⁹ Here, we will touch on the three Qur'ānic verses (33:53, 33:59, 24:30) which are most frequently referred to as evidence of Islamic veiling in the Qur'ān. According to Saher, Qur'ānic verse 33:53 is cited as “the verse of the Hijab” and has been regarded as the earliest revelation on the topic of Islamic veiling.¹⁰

O you who have faith! Do not enter the Prophet's houses unless permission is granted you for a meal, without waiting for it to be readied. But enter when you are invited, and disperse when you have taken your meal, without settling down to chat. Indeed such conduct torments the Prophet, and he is ashamed of [asking] you [to leave]; but Allah is not ashamed of [expressing] the truth. And when you ask anything of [his] womenfolk, ask it from them from behind a curtain. That is more chaste for your hearts and their hearts. You may not torment the Apostle of Allah, nor may you ever marry his wives after him. Indeed that would be a grave [matter] with Allah.¹¹

In this verse, the hijab is in essence a marker or a spatial curtain, used as a tool to enhance the security of the Prophet and his wives, which contrary to popular belief was meant to be placed on men who were instructed only to converse with the Prophets wives from behind a curtain so as to maintain their privacy.¹² The practice of veiling in this verse was largely meant for the elite, rather than the masses. Verse 33:59 on the other hand, does apply to the masses. In this verse, Muslim women are recommended to modify their clothing in order to differentiate themselves as free Muslim women from the ‘sexually available’ slaves who were often subject to harassment. As such, veiling in this Qur'ānic verse was to be a method of protection for free Muslim women while they were in public: a social marker.¹³ Qur'ānic verse 24:31 refers to veiling as well, and here, veiling is presented as a guideline for interaction between the sexes to encourage modest behaviour and ensure that inappropriate, extramarital sexual behaviour or temptation would be avoided.¹⁴

⁷Chelhod, “Ḥijāb.”

⁸Amer, 21.

⁹Bucar, *The Islamic Veil*, 24.

¹⁰Amer, 23.

¹¹The Qur'ān 33:53

¹²Amer, 25.

¹³Amer, 27.

¹⁴Bucar, 30.

Hadith is the second form of Islamic text we will analyze; they consist of the recordings of the words and teachings of Prophet Muhammad, which are used by many Muslims to set precedent for their own actions.¹⁵ Hadith are especially useful in terms of setting the context and chronology of Qur'ānic revelations.¹⁶ According to Clarke, “few Hadith deal with women’s modest dress, other than in ritual contexts or to warn against wearing thin clothing or short hemlines.”¹⁷¹⁸ Sahar confirms that among the Hadith, reference to women’s covering is quite minor and simply warns Muslim men and women to refrain from clothing worn out of “pride” as gaudy clothing is seen as immodest, going against a key value in Islam.¹⁹ The majority of references to approved clothing or shameful parts in Islamic society found within the Hadith refer actually to the modest dress of Muslim *men*.²⁰ Analysis of these texts informs us that within the Qur’ān and Hadith, the veil for women is in large part a protective tool, rather than a tool used for patriarchal segregation as the Western critique posits.

DO MUSLIM WOMEN NEED SAVING?

The perception that the hijab is anti-feminist is ironically anti-feminist in itself, and this false perception has consequences that surpass borders. El Shakry argues that simply adopting veiling as a backward and forced institution diminishes and downplays Muslim women's understanding and agency of their own practices.²¹ In reality, the burqa, in the eyes of many Muslims, was and remains a liberating invention as it has allowed Muslim women to escape the isolation of their homes and make their way into the public sphere without deviating from the moral underpinnings of modesty and decency that Islam values.²² For many Muslim women living in Western societies, veiling is used both as a method of resistance to imperialism and to demonstrate their agency to embody their Muslim identities in a Western context.²³ This discussion is imperative because notions of ‘anti-feminist veiling’ based in popular culture or fear-mongering politics can be harmful for Muslim women. Notions of veiling as oppressive both position Muslim women as if they are in need of saving, and position Islam as an inferior and uncivilized religion which is the open target of colonial attack. These anti-feminist veiling projects of saving women also depend on and reinforce the ‘West is best’ trope.²⁴ Moreover, images of Afghani

¹⁵Alvi, McDonough, and Hoodfar, *The Muslim Veil in North America*, 218.

¹⁶Bucar, 24.

¹⁷Clarke, “Hijab According to Hadith: Text and Interpretation,” 217.

¹⁸Alvi, McDonough, and Hoodfar, 218.

¹⁹Amer, 33.

²⁰Amer, 32.

²¹El Shakry, 299.

²²El Shakry 296.

²³Glapka, “Veiled Or Veiling?” 2.

²⁴El Shakry, 10.

women as the oppressed subjects of a barbaric and savage religious society in part justified the United States' use of force on Afghanistan in the early 2000's as a liberating endeavour, and may pose a similar risk in the future if the notion of the anti-feminist veil goes unchanged.²⁵

In conclusion, the Western critique that veils are anti-feminist perpetuate a pervasive polarization which places feminism on the side of the West's ideologies. Analysis of core Islamic texts such as the Qur'ān and Hadith provide us with a deeper understanding of veiling within Islam, decimating the narrative of the veil as a patriarchally enforced custom. Dispelling the findings of Islamic textual analysis is imperative as the anti-feminist veil narrative is pegged with its own set of consequences for Muslim women including reinforcing the 'West is best' trope and justifying 'liberating' foreign invasions. As such, we must remain weary of uncritically adopting the narratives presented to us by self-serving political media outlets and Hollywood films, among other things. In this case, Muslim women do *not* need saving.

²⁵Cloud, 286-287.

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